

The million and first book. [1963].

Leaves of Grass.

Brooklyn, New York: 1855.

The Million and First Book

Keepsake Number 11

University of Kentucky

Library Associates

1963

The Million and First Book in the University of Kentucky Library:

The First Edition of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, a Gift of the Library Associates

I am most honored to be invited to share in this memorable occasion that brings together so many of us who are involved with books and manuscripts. I am always happy to be among librarians with their high sense of dedication, but who today are worried about more books, more space, more personnel and more money. I always enjoy being with my slightly wild friends who indulge in the passionate and fascinating madness of bibliomania. A collector has only a few of the problems of the librarian. The book collector hardly ever worries about shelf space. When the shelves are filled, he just piles the books on the floor. But he is concerned about the scarcity of items that seems to exist only in the field of his particular interest and he is also mildly concerned about money.

Today's collectors join with many greats of the past to carry on a tradition begun in Europe and England several centuries ago. The history of many of our magnificent libraries is made of the stories of how they started or were built by collections of books and manuscripts, gathered by individuals. John Harvard's bequest of his few hundred books was the beginning of the millions of books now at the Harvard University Libraries. The collection of books formed by Thomas Jefferson, purchased by the Library of Congress is a familiar story to most of us. For the past hundred and fifth years, many of the important collections in American libraries were built by collectors obsessed by our understandable madness. I can mention a few American collectors of the past: John Carter Brown,

William Elkins, Henry Folger, Henry Huntington, James Lenox, Tracy McGregor, J. Pierpont Morgan and Harry Elkins Widener. There are collectors of our own time building great collections to be given to the institutions of their choice. It is a great tradition.

The historical treasures of the University of Kentucky Library include the record of the pioneers settling in a new country, saving and arranging the materials of their own history, the journal of a Kentucky frontiersman, the records of a meeting to form a town, a sketch of the houses they built, and the story of their first church. All this and more is now of interest to us and will be to future generations.

Almost a hundred years ago, when the University of Kentucky was founded, American literature had been enriched by several new books written by a few American authors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had written *English Traits* and *The Conduct of Life*. Emerson's idealism in the American spirit is among the best in American literature. Emerson wrote, "Books are the best of things, well used ... and great and heroic men have existed, who had almost no other information than by the printed page ... thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretention avail nothing ... forget this and our American Colleges recede in their public importance."

Nathaniel Hawthorne had written *The Scarlet Letter*, and in this book you have New England vividness of perception and ideality, and you have an expression for much that was part of the genius of Hawthorne. Henry James wrote in his book on Hawthorne that "*The Scarlet Letter* was the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the country. There was consciousness of this in the welcome that was given it—a satisfaction in the idea of America having produced a novel that belonged to literature."

Another author of this great period was Henry David Thoreau. There was always something of the spirit of the pioneer in Thoreau. His building the bare hut to live in at Walden Pond, his determination to live a simple and primitive life and his experiences produced the book *Walden*. Certainly an American classic. Literary history shows that most classics are unfortunately born in obscurity, sell a few hundred copies, simmer for a hundred years, and then become a collector's item. Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, which Emerson encouraged him to publish, is in this class.

Another book of which must of the same words could be said was Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. When the book was first published there was little acceptance of this masterpiece. When Melville received a letter from Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had the perception to understand the extraordinary qualities shown in *Moby Dick*, Melville answered her letter, showing how much her

praise meant to him, "It really amazed me that you find any satisfaction in that book." This letter is in the collection of one of our friends present.

About one hundred years ago when these books were written, was also one of the darkest periods in our political history. It was at this time that *Leaves of Grass* was published. Walt Whitman, its author, had been a printer, a journalist, an editor, had previously written a temperance novel, which we today would call a pot boiler, and was a successful builder. By May 1855 he felt he was ready to publish his book *Leaves of Grass* and deliberately turned his back on all his money-making ventures, to do what he believed he was born to do, to be a poet and singer of America's songs, the architect of the American Dream.

The first edition of his book contains some of Whitman's best poetry and introduces his main themes. In his preface he states his idea of the poet of democracy and the kind of poetry he must write, and outlines his philosophy: "This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and the crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people."

In the poem, afterwards entitled *Song of Myself*, Whitman as such a poet, announces himself and his major ideas, identifies himself through catalogues, word pictures, and brief narratives with all human experiences including death and immortality. Primarily, Whitman will be remembered as a poet, as the author of a few hundred of the greatest lines in world literature. Whitman took his artistic vocation very seriously.

In his early notebooks in which he jotted down ideas, some of which he later used in the first printing of *Leaves of Grass*, he writes, "Because women do not appear in history and philosophy with anything like the same prominence as men—that is no reason for treating them less than men ... There was a child went forth every day—and the first thing that he looked at with fixed love, that thing he became for the day ... Do you suppose the world is finished, at any certain time like a contract for paving a street? Do you suppose because the American Government has been formed, and public schools established, we have nothing more to do but take our ease, and make money, and sleep out the rest of the time? Books profoundly considered, show a great nation more than anything else—more than laws or manners.... *My lesson* / Have you learned my lesson complete: / It is well—it is but the gate to a larger lesson—and that to another: / And each successive one to another still."

It was with the first edition of his *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman dared to tap the deeper sources of health, confidence and creativity in the life of America and in the thought of the world, and

counterbalanced the more dismal features of American existence by presenting an ideal prospect for democracy, founded on a fresh view of human life and destiny.

Emerson on reading a copy of the first edition, wrote to Walt Whitman (I will only quote a few words), "The most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed ... and ... I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Malcolm Cowley, in his introduction to a reprint of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1959, said, "The first edition of *Leaves of Leaves of Grass* is a landmark of American literature that has been almost lost from sight under Whitman's many later revisions and additions ... the first edition is a unified work, unlike any later edition. It gives us a different picture of Whitman's achievement, and considering its very small circulation through the years, it might be called the buried masterpiece of American writing."

I have talked of books and librarians, of collectors and collections and libraries. I want to say a few words about the University of Kentucky Library Associates. They are the Friends of your library. Very understandably, they realize that your budget is hardly adequate for your basic needs in books and periodicals, and that you have no money for the books a library as important as yours should have.

There should be some special books of fine printing to inspire the student to be interested in type and fine paper. A fine binding that marries art to the book. A historical document that brings alive an earlier period. A letter of literary importance to create a moment of intimacy with the author. And so Dr. Knisely, on behalf of the Associates of the University of Kentucky Library, it is my privilege to present to you the first issue of the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as your book number one million and one.

Charles E. Feinberg

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